

Habit Patterns, Who Needs Them?

Photo by Matthew J. Thomas

By Ltjg. Paul Slaybaugh

Being a first-cruise JO brings many challenges. You have the whole flying-around-the-boat thing, getting used to living at sea, working with all the other guys in the air wing, learning the general ins-and-outs of mission planning, and doing your job in the jet on long missions over bad-guy country. And, oh yeah, the bad guys are shooting at you. It's a lot to deal with for a nugget fresh out of the EA-6B RAG, with less than 300 hours in the Prowler.

As ECMOs, we spend two-thirds of our flights in the back, as either ECMO 2 or 3, operating the ALQ-99 on-board system and the tactical-jamming system. We also rotate up front with the pilot to help him navigate. The rotation cycle means we don't do the same job every time we fly, making habit patterns more difficult to develop.

Habit patterns are something I never thought much about, until recently, when I almost took a front-seat cat shot without being strapped into my harness. Sure, it's part of the checklist, "armed top and bottom, attached six." Those words flow right out of my mouth without even thinking—bad habit pattern.

As our director taxied us forward into the shuttle, seconds from being shot out over the water at 135 knots, I locked my harness and leaned forward—good habit pattern. To my surprise, my harness did not keep me locked in place: I could lean completely forward. Fortunately, I had a backup-habit pattern to make sure I'm strapped in—my backup pattern saved me.

I expressed my shock over the ICS to alert the crew, "Hey, my #@%*&* harness won't lock."

As you might imagine, this announcement got my pilot's attention. He looked me over for a second or two, then reached over, without saying a word, and slapped me upside the helmet with the Koch fitting on my shoulder strap.

After the flight, I thought about how such a thing could have happened. I decided my problem came down to a lack of consistent habit patterns. Every time I climbed into the front seat, I would set up my "nest" a different way. Sometimes I would put up my boarding ladder first, sometimes I would turn on the radios and get them set up, sometimes I would strap in (sometimes not). I used a different way every time, all sort of haphazard. My lack of consistency could have been tragic.

So, to answer the question, "Habit patterns, who needs them?" I believe we all do. 🇺🇸

Ltjg. Slaybaugh flies with VAQ-131.

Photo by PHAN Ryan T. O'Con